Writing *Skin of the Sea*

Natasha Bowen

Year One. Mrs Stark. Age six. The Egyptians.

This is the first time I was excited about history. We spent a whole term learning about Ancient Egypt: how to mummify bodies, the architecture of the pyramids, the gods and pharaohs. I remember making a fact booklet on the Egyptians, and writing my name in hieroglyphics, perfecting each character. I was in awe of this civilisation and all that they had achieved. What I also found absorbing and highly satisfying, even at age six, was the act of researching. Looking at different sources and gaining a picture of a completely alternate time.

Since then, history has always been a passion of mine. When I first decided to write a story about Black mermaids with African origins, history became a focus that would shape everything. From articles and books to academic papers, comparing anecdotal stories with friends, Facetime calls with an Ifá priest, webinars, YouTube videos and more, I dedicated a long time to researching *Skin of the Sea*.

Africa before the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism has always interested me even though it was never taught in any of my formal educational settings. Whilst in secondary school, I didn't learn anything about Africa other than the slave trade, and even this focused on the economic benefits and repercussions, with a dash of England's 'progressive role' in leading the abolition of the slave trade.

Growing up, I did my own reading, understanding that Africa's history doesn't start with slavery. It is a continent intricate and rich with knowledge. From medicine to mathematics, astronomy, art and architecture, the breadth of African culture is immense.

Following my desire to write about mermaids with African origins, I began to research the varied beliefs about them. One of the earliest mentions of mermaid-like beings in Africa came from the Dogon people of Mali. They believed in the Nommo, amphibian beings with mermaid characteristics that came to Earth and created the first waters. The Dogon tell the story of the Nommos' arrival in chariots driven by fire from the sky, and detail how they guided their human ancestors in knowledge and life. What intrigued me about this is that the Dogon people had extensive knowledge of the solar system. Some say that they knew about the rotation of the Sirius B star, not visible to the naked eye, long before Western astronomers 'discovered' this in the twentieth century.

African spirituality is sometimes misunderstood and is demonised by some. I spoke to an Ifá priest, Baba Ifamuyiwa, over the course of a year, and I was able to learn more about the Ifá spiritual beliefs and build on my knowledge of Yoruba deities. The orisas play a significant part in Ifá and each has unique powers, representing different aspects such as justice, agriculture etc. They range from Olodumare, who is the Supreme Creator, to Esu the trickster and messenger, and Sango, orisa of thunder, lighting and fire. Hearing stories of these powerful African gods captivated me.

Across the continent, there are numerous stories of other mermaids, from the Mondao in southern Africa to the mermaid of Karoo and Mami Wata. Mami Wata are said to be water spirits, but the term has also been applied to deities such as Yemoja. An orisa in the Ifá spiritual belief system, Yemoja is a goddess presented as half woman, half fish. Yemoja is an interesting deity to me because she was said to have left the rivers and streams that she inhabited to follow the first enslaved people taken from her lands. There are stories of her following ships to offer comfort to the taken, while others believe that she wrecked the ships in anger. Some believe that she gathered the souls of those who passed in the sea to return them home to Olodumare. This is one of the main inspirations for the plot of *Skin of the Sea* and is a fascinating example of how beliefs and stories of a deity and spirituality were gradually transformed. I was interested in how names change (Yemoja is known as Yemaya, Iemanjá and more across the diaspora) and how, although stories may vary, the core beliefs of West African deities and spirituality were upheld by generations of people, no matter their location in the world.

Reading more about the origins of these beliefs, and the people who passed them on, led me to delve deeper. Building on my knowledge of ancient African kingdoms, I wasn't surprised to learn of the wonder of the Portuguese in the fifteenth century when they first travelled to West Africa. Benin and other kingdoms were light years ahead of Portugal, with streetlights, advanced medicine, and complex mathematical systems. I knew that my story needed to showcase this, to interrupt the unfair and primitive associations previously attributed to Africa.

Architecture in ancient Africa was another aspect that piqued my interest. I already knew about the churches carved into stone in Ethiopia, and the libraries at Timbuktu, but I became particularly taken with the walls of Benin. Comprised of moats and ramparts, they were said to be four times longer than the Great Wall of China and, as shown in a drawing of the layout of the city, were obviously organised in a particular way. I soon found out that the streets and compounds were in fractal arrangements. Fractals are patterns that repeat endlessly and stretch into infinity. They are found everywhere from trees to our lungs and brains, although natural fractals do come to an end. I hate maths, but I became obsessed with knowing more about fractals and how they had been utilised across Africa. I read Ron Eglash's book on this and watched the ethno-mathematician's TED talks. Eglash spoke of finding examples of these repeating patterns in the way that houses and compounds were set out, in stacked utensils and even in hairstyles.

Eglash believed these examples to be proof that Africans understood the mathematical concept of infinity and used this in their everyday living.

Enamoured with fractals and drawn to the beauty of this mathematical idea, I used simulators to create my own fractals and admired contemporary art inspired by them. When it came to West African examples found in the Kọ̀lẹ́sẹ̀ (also known as cane/corn rows) hairstyle, I began to look for others, and fangirled over fabrics that had an array of repeating patterns. When I say fractals consumed me, I mean it!

From finding out more about West Africa before the transatlantic slave trade, to a land on the cusp of this, I was drawn to research another aspect that is not widely explored: resistance in trading with Europeans. We hear a lot about how different African kingdoms sold prisoners of war to Europeans, but less about how they themselves were often kidnapped, and how some fought against this. *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies* by Sylviane A. Diouf details the different ways in which resistance manifested. Examples include entire villages relocated from the coastal areas where the Portuguese first ventured to impenetrable forestland. The villagers knew that, at that time, the Portuguese lacked the knowledge to follow them inland. To move a settlement is extreme but very clever, and the coordination to move an entire community, and then thrive in a new setting, is mind-blowing.

Another form of resistance that inspired me, and formed part of the plot of *Skin of the Sea*, was the patrolling of tributaries by Africans and the subsequent attacks on European ships. Once Europeans arrived in West Africa, they stuck to coastal areas but, when they first tried to venture inland using waterways, they were often driven back by African patrols.

Researching *Skin of the Sea* also became a way for me to connect with my father's Nigerian heritage. I think that there is a beauty and power in knowing where your ancestors come from, what they stood for and what they believed in. It is also a privilege that not all Black people share because of the transatlantic slave trade. With my father being Yoruba, my delving more into the culture, history and religious beliefs added to the connection I feel. My thirst for learning and discovering more also inspired me to begin learning Yoruba. It was important for me to include the language in the book, using it for words or phrases that are particularly meaningful or have specific cultural importance.

I wanted to write a story about Black mermaids because I just didn't see their representation in my own world. Combining Black mermaids with the context of their African origins became my goal. To complement this, and to stay true to this concept, I also wanted to include other fantastical creatures known across West Africa. Including Senegalese fairies, shape-shifters, and river monsters in *Skin of the Sea* pays tribute to the myths and legends that have existed and have been retold over generations. There are not as many stories written down, since most are passed on orally, but hints can be found from various sources, such as Baba

Ifamuyiwa and friends across the world who have shared similar tales. To discuss all of these, noting regional differences and cultural nuances, was amazing. My goal was to showcase all of these facets in a Young Adult book where some readers will learn about alternate mythologies and others will see some of the stories that they grew up with.

With all these aspects of history and spirituality swirling around, they couldn't help but shape *Skin of the Sea*. I wanted to create a story with a strong frame of history. To write a story set in a time where West Africa, although on the cusp of a horrific period, exhibited excellence, creativity, and power; a time before the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism began to erode and rewrite the continent's history.

In researching this book, I was not only able to create a story woven with myths and tenacious characters, but I was also able to explore and present traditional spirituality, lesser-known historical facts and to hammer home the brilliance of African knowledge. *Skin of the Sea* is the result of my obsessive research. It is an amalgamation of books, conversations, articles, anecdotes, and an intense passion for history. It is the product of my overwhelming urge to write a fantasy story not widely seen.

Natasha Bowen

Natasha Bowen is of Nigerian and Welsh descent and lives in Cambridge, England, where she grew up. Natasha studied English and Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, before moving to East London, where she taught for nearly ten years. Her debut book, *Skin Of The Sea,* was inspired by her passion for mermaids and African history and will be published by Penguin in November 2021.

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**